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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL PREPARED TO USE FORCE TO BLOCK HAMAS
DEMONSTRATION FROM REACHING CROSSINGS

Classified By: Political Counselor Marc Sievers, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. According to Israeli media reports, Hamas organizers in Gaza called for a mass demonstration February 25 against the closure of the border crossings, but IDF sources estimated that only about 4,000 demonstrators showed up. There was no attempt by the demonstrators to approach the border crossings and no confrontation with Israeli security forces, which were on a high state of alert. The risk of violence appears to have passed for the time being, but Hamas may try again. The GOI has sent clear warnings that it is prepared to use force to prevent a repeat of Hamas' successful breach of the Rafah crossing with Egypt last month. While some voices in Israel are calling for calm, the tensions with Gaza as a result of daily rocket attacks are causing the GOI to adopt a tough position regarding any potential attempt to breach the border crossings with Gaza. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Israeli media provided extensive coverage the evening of February 24 and morning of February 25 to announced plans by Hamas to organize mass demonstrations in Gaza against the Israeli "blockade." Israeli television evening news broadcasts February 24 featured a spokesman for the previously unknown "Popular Committee to Remove the Blockade" who announced plans to bring forty thousand demonstrators, including thousands of women and children, to form a human chain extending from Rafah to the Beit Hanoun on the northern end of the Strip. All major Israeli newspapers February 25 reported preparations by the IDF and Border Police to use up to six thousand troops to block any attempts by Gazan demonstrators to force their way through any of the crossings. IDF and Border Police units reportedly had orders to gradually increase the level of force, starting with warning shots in the air and ending with live fire, to prevent any attempt to rush the crossings.

¶3. (C) MFA orally briefed us on a set of MOD-coordinated talking points February 25. The talking points emphasized that while Israel will not interfere in demonstrations inside Gaza and has no desire to escalate tensions, Israel will not tolerate any violation of its borders. Noting that since Hamas destroyed the border fence at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt there have been reports that Hamas is planning to attempt a similar operation at an Israeli border crossing, the talking points stress that Hamas is planning to use civilians as human shields and therefore Hamas must be held responsible for any loss of innocent life. The MFA notes that Hamas is trying to undermine Israel's negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and is responsible for daily rocket attacks on Israeli communities near Gaza. The points conclude by asking Israel's friends to condemn Hamas' actions.

¶4. (C) The demonstration began at 10:00 am local but apparently never reached the scale announced by the Gaza organizers. IDF sources report that only about four thousand

demonstrators turned up, most of them school children, and no attempt was made to approach any of the border crossings. IDF sources reported at 1330 that they were tracking Hamas activists driving around Beit Hanoun in search of students to mobilize, but no one had attempted to approach the nearby Erez Crossing. As of 1500, IDF and MFA sources confirmed that the demonstration had concluded without incident, although they warned that Israeli security forces continued to be on high alert. Meanwhile, a number of Qassam rockets were fired at Sderot, resulting in injury to one child.

15. (C) Comment. It is not clear whether the demonstration fizzled due to lack of public enthusiasm, stern Israeli warnings, bad weather, or some combination of the three. Having generated considerable media attention, including from Arab satellite channels, Hamas may still view such demonstrations as a new way to put Israel on the defensive over Gaza. While there are some voices in Israel calling for a calm reaction without "falling into Hamas' trap," the prevailing view here appears to be that Israel must use "any means necessary" to prevent Hamas from succeeding in penetrating the border, even if that requires the use of lethal force against unarmed civilians. The situation further underscores the need for new Israeli thinking about the Gaza crossings since the initiative continues to be in the hands of Hamas.

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JONES